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ABSTRACT

In the present paper, the author appears to believe that there is a communication gap between planners for student orientation programs and educational researchers. The difference has traditionally been that orientation planners concentrated their efforts on the framing of questions while the educational researchers focused on the development of a repertoire of techniques for obtaining answers. Since they have not had a satisfactory method of communicating with each other, the planners developed poor tools for answering their valid and relevant questions, while the researchers developed sophisticated methods of answering relatively impractical questions. What is needed is a plan to get the two groups together, to have the researchers apply their techniques to the questions asked by those responsible for the planning of orientation programs. Such a model is proposed in this paper, and a working model in effect at the State University of New York, College at Cswego is described. (Author/HS)

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ORIENTATION RESEARCH: LIKE A BRIDGE OVER TURBID WATERS

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The chasm which separates orientation planners from educational researchers may be very deep, but it is not very wide. Sometimes members of each group journey to their own side of the chasm, look across, and wave at each other. Occasionally someone gathers enough courage to shout what sounds like a greeting to the group on the other side but, after bemoaning the fact that the gap that separates them is a deep one, each group turns and sorrowfully walks back to their own isolated community. Once in a while, the journey to the chasm is a ceremonious one, often referred to as a convention. Each group processes to the chasm and shouts their message across to their colleagues on the other side. Unfortunately, they have lived so long in isolation that, although they speak the same language, their dialects are different. If the message is received at all, it is rarely understood. Each side stares at the depth of their separation, but they can never contribute to one another until someone realizes that the gap that spearates them is only deep, it is not very wide; and could, with a little creativity, be bridged.

One way of bridging the chasm that separates orientation planners and researchers may be to emphasize the commonality of the task they face. Both groups are professional problem solvers. The difference has traditionally been that orientation planners concentrated their efforts on the framing of questions while the educational researchers focused on the development of a repitoire of techniques for obtaining answers. Since they have not had a satisfactory method of communicating with each other, the planners developed poor tools for answering their valid and relevant questions, while the researchers developed sophisticated methods of answering relatively impractical questions. The trick is to get the two groups together, to have the researchers apply their techniques to the questions asked by those responsible for the planning of orientation programs.

Perhaps a model would make this clear. Let us think about orientation as a machine or, in the terms of systems analyist, a "black box". At each end of the orientation machine is a door where students, fresh from the admissions process, enter, undergo some as yet unspecified process, and emerge from the other end of the machine changed and ready to meet the rigors of academic life. To use this model, the orientation planners must carefully note the discrepancies between the student who enters the machine and the ideal student who emerges from the other end. By noting each of the important differences and listing them, orientation planners can achieve the goal posed for them by many education theorists: The list of discrepancies between the real and the ideal student is a list of program objectives. The machine, by analogy, the orientation program, is the means of reducing the discrepancies. If the objectives are carefully drawn and very specific, they may even correspond closely to the behavioral objectives advocated by Bloom, Krathwhol and Mager among others. In fact, once the input and the output of the orientation machine have been fully defined, it is possible for a creative orientation planner to infer what the inner workings of the machine might be, the process by which incoming students are transformed from the raw material of the admissions office to the finished product of the orientation program. The mechanics of the machine are the activities of the orientation program.

While such a model is simplistic, it does help to systematize the chaos now facing most orientation planners. Granted, the model fails to account for the very real political considerations, external pressures, and monetary restrictions imposed upon the process; but it does permit orientation planners to focus some of their attention on such specific, answerable questions as: "What is the entering student really like?", "What should the entering student be like at the conclusion of a

successful orientation process?", "What specific changes must occur between these two states?", "What kinds of programs are likely to produce these desired changes?", and "How well did the program succeed?". Another advantage of this model is that it has incorporated into it the means of evaluation. By measuring the extent to which each important discrepancy between the student as he enters and leaves the orientation process is reduced, the extent to which the program successfully accomplished each objective can be assessed. By modeling, orientation planners can begin to apply the principles of logic to the problem of meeting the needs of students as opposed to merely responding to the crises faced by students.

Inherent in such a model, however, is a new and perhaps even more frightening realization. For a long time, educators have thought of themselves as objective professionals. It is clear, when such a model is applied, that the objectivity they so covet can never be achieved. To paraphrase, Adrian VanAam, in his superb exposition on the use of assumptions in psychology "Every orientation planner who approaches the problem of adjustment to college, selects necessarily one out of the many viewpoints which could be taken. It is essential that the planner does not look on the incoming student and the university in all of their dimensions but that he limits himself to selecting part of their interaction. This selection is based on a choice and on examples that are relatively subjunctive."

For example, in the model just outlined, the most subjective aspect is in the definition of the outcome of the orientation process. There are few objective models applicable to all colleges and all students that would help to characterize the ideal entering student. Some planners would choose to emphasize intellectual characteristics, others the dimensions of psychological openness, others spiritual or value orientation, and still others political orientations. It is impossible to characterize any of these dimensions as unimportant; however, it would be foolish to

consider them as equally important for each institution. Each college, each orientation planner, and each involved member of the campus community has a value orientation which defines the way in which he will perceive the ideal student. No truly objective method is at the planner's disposal to answer the question of desirable outcomes. In fact, most of the meetings and discussions you will have at this conference will center on this very issue. Even in more concrete areas of planning, the problem of assumptions is not avoided, since most colleges know very little about their incoming students, particularly in the areas defined as important by orientation planners. While admissions offices collect extensive data on the high school record, activities, and test scores of incoming students, virtually nothing is known about their value orientation and needs and hopes, their worries, their fears, or their aspirations.

In order to define the entering student, each orientation planner is forced to make a number of assumptions about the students with whom he will be dealing. Perhaps his assumptions come from conversations with students who have survived their freshman year and have had experience with previous orientation programs, perhaps with the model of freshmen that he developed when he himself was a freshman, or with the literature or speeches that he has heard. It would be, however, foolish to state that these assumptions are true; they are simply the orientation planners' best guesses about truth. Fortunately, while some of them are doomed to remain as assumptions, others may be examined objectively. Here is where the skills and talents of the researcher can be brought to bear. If the orientation planner is skillful in defining the ideal student and clearly describes the parameters of his model, research can be applied to determine the pre-orientation status of freshmen on these dimensions, as well as to describe the milieu in which the incoming student exists. By eliminating as many assumptions as possible and by

clearly denoting those which cannot be eliminated, the orientation planner can discharge his responsibilities with a far greater degree of certainty than present practice permits.

Since it should be obvious by now that orientation planning is based on an amalgam of assumptions and facts and since it is relatively clear that whenever a planner can choose between an assumption and a fact, he should choose the fact, let us consider the research scheme in which the certainty of necessary assumptions and the proportion of facts may be maximized. There are three general approaches that may be taken in order to test the assumptions necessary for adequate planning. First, the past decade has given us a tremendous amount of written material of a general nature: fiction, poetry, and essays written about students, by students, and for students. While there can be little doubt that the bulk of this material is personalized and; therefore, somewhat biased, it is a rich realm to explore. For example, the literature of the American Association for Higher Education, the publications of such groups as the American Council on Education, the Jossey-Bass series, testimonies before governmental legislative bodies, student newspapers, and literary magazines, all offer the orientation planner an opportunity to more clearly formulate his assumptions about students at both ends of the orientation process. In fact, all of the orientation planner's reading--recreational and professional--can serve to help him to develop and to clarify his view of students. Probably no more fruitful means of understanding the students on a particular campus exists than to read what the students read when they are free to choose. In other words, the rich general literature available about young people can serve to broaden the orientation planner's view of the student and the institution he serves and, most importantly, the way in which these two interact.

A second field of literature is also important. Research journals, dissertations, theses, and such compendium as the ERIC system are focused on the more objective aspects of the student, college, and their interaction. While much of this work is directed toward other ends, the variables, particularly those related to the growth and development of students, that modern research have identified, can be extremely useful. It is silly to search for an assumption if the ground on which the assumption may be found has already been objectively defined. The research literature offers another advantage. It has been cataloged, cross referenced, and even abstracted, to make the planner's search a fruitful one. Of course, there is a danger; much of the research that is done on colleges and their students involves a relatively small and biased population; consequently, the findings ought to be viewed with an initial skepticism. As truthful as they may be about a particular population of students, they may not serve to describe the students with whom you are working. However, in spite of the deficiencies, these sources of assumptions and facts can be useful and should be continually and creatively explored.

It might even be in order to suggest that orientation planners should continuously compile a list of those things they believe to be true about students, entering and finishing the orientation process. Initially such a list will probably be long but as the years go by and additions and deletions take place, it will serve to define for the planner the assumptions that he is using in his task of problem solving. Please notice the list does not include those things that are known to be true, but only those that are believed to be true, for as soon as an assumption is known to be true, it is no longer an assumption. Such an exercise may be tedious, but it serves to effectively alert the orientation planner to the uncertainties inherent to his thought processes. After compiling the list, it would be fruitful

to review the assumptions to determine if any of them may be substantiated objectively. In other words, to take the statements of belief and to attempt to transform them into the mathematical models and designs of the researcher and to determine the degree to which they apply to the population in questions.

Third, each orientation planner can develop and conduct locally relevant research. Perhaps it would be useful to cite some of the successes and frustrations we have had as we attempted to do this at the State University College at Oswego. Here, orientation is one of the responsibilities of the Third Curriculum, a group made up of a professional staff member and a loosely organized coordinating committee of interested students, faculty members, and administrators who are charged with the responsibility of developing and supporting programs to foster those aspects of student development that are not provided for within the framework of the formal curriculum, the extra-curriculum, and services of the Division of Student Affairs. The activities of the Third Curriculum Coordinating Committee are funded through an orientation fee charged to all incoming students. In spite of the fact that the Director is a professional staff member of the Division of Student Affairs, the Third Curriculum has sought and enjoys the active support of all segments of the campus community. For the purposes of better understanding the application of the model we have been discussing here, we will confine our attention to the orientation activities of the Third Curriculum. The scope of its activities are far broader and pervasive than orientation alone.

Summer orientation activities are planned and implemented by two separate "task forces" under the direction of different student leaders. One is responsible for the summer program, in which teams of students, faculty members, and administrators journey to community colleges across New York State to meet with incoming students and their parents. The other concentrates its efforts on providing programs for

incoming students, freshmen and transfers, during the typical orientation period, the first few weeks of the fall remester.

Shortly after the adoption of this form of orientation planning at Oswego, the position of Assistant Dean of Students was created. One of the responsibilities of the incumbent of this position was to "develop, implement, and communicate the results of research projects relating to the out-of-class needs of students." The juxtaposition of these two events, a new approach to orientation and the creation of at least a part-time researcher, provided the opportunity; the realization of the orientation planners that the models upon which programs had been based in the past were not applicable to a post-Berkely student body, provide the motive and led to a common project - "What was the Oswego freshman really like?"

Since the models of the past were in question and since the results of the project were to be applied directly and immediately to the development of programs for new students, it was decided that a subjective, semi-projective instrument was most appropriate (no hypotheses were suggested) and a locally meaningful incomplete sentence blank was devised. It included such items as:

1. The most important thing about a college degree_____
2. When I am thirty, I expect_____
3. The one thing that I really need to know about college_____
4. I am most frightened about_____

The instrument, the Student Orientation Survey, was administered by student leaders to a random sample of incoming freshmen during the summer tour of the Orientation Team. The informal report, issued to all interested members of the college community before the students arrived on campus, included the following conclusions:

Most college students felt that the most important reason for attending college was to insure their future vocational success. Relevance was a relative term since students had different goals in mind when they thought of the purpose of college. Students were unable to clearly define what they meant when they spoke of the "educated man". Entering freshmen saw the college experience as the means to become part of American society and the college degree as a means of insuring their security and happiness. They expected their professors to be warm, understanding, and helpful. Their description of these expectations sounded very much like the description of an ideal father. Entering freshman were concerned with the immediate problems of adjustment and if these were solved, they were concerned with the discrepancies between the way they saw themselves presently and the way they might be ideally.

As plans were being made for the next orientation program, the Coordinating Committee became concerned that it was suffering from a communication gap and that there was a discrepancy between the message they were sending to incoming students and the message freshmen were receiving. Since the student strike and Kent State had occurred at the time plans were formulated, the members of the committee were worried that their perceptions, radically changed by the traumatic events they had survived, would not be shared by new students who had only seen them on TV. Since the communication gap appeared to be one of meaning, rather than definition, a semantic differential was devised to assess the manner in which incoming freshmen perceived thirty critical concepts. The differential was administered in the same manner as the previous year to a random sample of freshmen. The results of this descriptive study (SOS II) were presented graphically, rather than statistically to interested members of the campus community. Some of the more interesting findings included:

Students entering Oswego are, in general, rather traditional in their orientation toward college. They value education, books, reading, and dating. They see dating as a means to marriage and marriage is closely tied to success, money, and a career. If this is the "middle class ethic", so be it. These are important concepts to freshmen in general.

Students entering Oswego, in general, value the people with whom they come into contact. They tend to see teachers, professors, deans, students, and parents are rather closely related and as positive. None of these figures are, of course, infallible, but they are valued. If a generation gap exists, the data presented here indicated that its effect can be mitigated by an effort to bridge a "people gap." Persons associated with the college are seen as closer to parents than their high school counterparts, raising real questions about the nature of in loco parentis. Is it a real problem or is it based upon self-fulfilling expectations on the part of students and, perhaps, college personnel? The difficulty is not without its compensations though, for parents are rather desirable people to be like in the eyes of entering students, particularly women.

More radical concepts are not as well regarded by entering students as are more traditional ones. Both men and women expressed extremely negative reactions to Kent State and the Cambodian Invasion, but tend to tie these to concepts like Student Radicals, Black Power, and Drugs. This is not to imply that entering students see these terms as closely related or that a specific event like Kent State could not radicalize them, but that this radicalization would be difficult to sustain in conflict with the more traditional values.

Men and women tend to order their perceptual world in similar ways. While the report has tended to emphasize the differences between the sexes the overall patterns of arrangement are similar. Concepts tend to be judged in the same way by both sexes. Women are inclined to be more positive in their attitudes toward scholarly drudgery than men and more negative toward drugs and premarital sex, but even in these areas the similarities are striking.

While planning for the next year, the Coordinating Committee became concerned with two more problems: How do freshmen differ from upperclassmen in terms of their needs, values, and aspirations? And, is it appropriate to base planning on the model of a typical freshman or are there several 'species' of typical freshmen? To answer these questions, a complex form of the semantic differential was devised, using twelve short, philosophical statements about a variety of educational concerns, from several points of view. Again, the instrument was administered to students by students during the summer program, but instead of an informal descriptive report, complex statistical manipulations were performed, including factor analysis and linkage-cluster analysis. The questions were answered in the following manner:

Freshmen and upperclassmen do differ, but the difference is a subtle one. While the freshman is somewhat unclear about his values, the upperclassman is more definite. It is as if there were two projectors, each containing the same slide. One is slightly out of focus and, while the outlines of the image on the screen can be discerned, the colors are indistinct and the details lost in an annoying blur. The other projector, more sharply focused, projects an image that has clear and distinct colors and well defined details. The slides are not different nor are the projectors. The difference is in the adjustment of the focus. If freshmen

have values that are less clearly focused when compared to their upperclass counterparts, then the task of the orientation planner is to develop a program that will help the incoming student to bring his values into focus. There is no need to change the slide for it is the same as the upperclassman's.

In answer to the second question, we discovered that five groups of students, made up of individuals more like one another than they were like members of the other groups, were defined. Type I students, progressive pessimists, tend to believe that higher education takes place in an environment of impersonality--text books, lectures, and office hours. They also feel that college is an inadequate preparation for life after graduation, perhaps as a consequence of the ineffectiveness of the educational process. These students do not appear to be happy that college is the way they see it, but they do not seem to offer any solution, just a pervasive pessimism.

Type II students, progressive optimists, suggest that college is a relatively humane institution that encompasses more than formal contacts between students and professors. They tend to feel that traditional structures and standards are unlikely to interfere with the development of their values and attitudes. These students believe that college will prepare them for life, but they are willing to recognize the fact that further strides in institutional development must be taken.

Type III students, traditional optimists, feel that they can readily develop both their knowledge and their values within the context of traditional structures. They believe that college will prepare them

adequately for the future. These students are optimistic about the experience they are about to embark upon.

Type IV students, idealistic resistors, are convinced that the only significant learning is self-discovered and that formal learning experiences are likely to be both impersonal and ineffective. They seem to believe that they will develop in spite of college rather than because of it. These students feel that if college has any effect on students it is to homogenize them and to transform them into mediocre copies of an "educated man". They believe that they will have to actively resist college.

Type V students, traditional isolates, believe that traditional academic structures provide adequate opportunities for them to prepare themselves for life after college. These individuals have unusual faith in the college and its faculty. They have far less confidence in their fellow students. These students do not expect college to have very much influence on their values, but this is not a concern. They expect to prepare themselves for life. They want to increase their knowledge and skills, but they want privacy in their non-academic affairs.

Perhaps as important, but less spectacular, were the attempts made to apply research techniques to more specific questions such as:

What are the priority needs of freshmen?

How can we select effective orientation leaders?

How have freshmen and their parents received these programs?

Without minimizing the difficulties we have had or maximizing the successes, both orientation planners and researchers believe that the relationship that exists provides separate benefits for both.

Obviously, not all orientation planners have direct access to a researcher; however, most campuses have more than one faculty member interested in investigating the problems facing the college students. Many times such researchers would be delighted to have the opportunity to serve as a consultant to the orientation policy-making board, since it would give him easy access to large samples of students, often in captive situations, that are not always readily available. Since most researchers operate with little institutional financial support, the promise of a reasonable supply of paper, ditto machines, and volunteer help, should serve as a powerful enducement. Often while answering orientation questions, the researcher can simultaneously pursue his own, more theoretical, ends. Since a flexible relationship appears to offer benefits to both the researcher and the orientation planners, research on entering students at Oswego may be the result of specific questions asked by the program committee or it may be the result of mere curiousity on the part of the researcher.

There is an additional benefit for the researcher. Instead of couching his results in the dialect of the professional journals, he must learn to present it persuasively and clearly for an audience of laymen. College students are often suspicious of social engineers and objective observers. The discipline of explaining the results to an orientation committee is one that will serve both the committee and the researcher well. Students also benefit from the contact with pragmatically oriented research, for few student activities offer him the opportunity to apply the methodology learned in the classroom to the real problems demanding real solutions.

To summarize, the chasm between orientation planners can be built. The orientation planning process can be conceptualized as problem solving and the elements of logical analysis can be applied. Assumptions can be formulated and tested, insights gained, a program inferred, and the success of the program can be evaluated within

the context of the model. While the model can be applied without recourse to objectivity, the use of a researcher as a consultant to the orientation planner can serve to reduce the discrepancy between reality and the students with whom you deal. In such a way we need not come to the chasm and look hopefully but mournfully at the other side; rather, we can walk across a bridge that will enable each group to better serve its purpose. Better programs and more fruitful knowledge are the likely result.